

THE OPEN WINDOW¹

BY CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE

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"IT happened just as I have said," Fernet reiterated, tossing the wine-dregs from his glass.

The company at the table looked instinctively toward the kitchen. Berthe was bringing a fresh pot of coffee. They all followed Fernet's example, lifting their empty glasses for her to serve them in their turn.

The regular boarders of the Hôtel de France, after the fashion of folks who find their meal a duty to be promptly despatched, had departed, but the transients still lingered over their *café noir* and cognac in the hope that something exciting might materialize.

As the sound of Fernet's voice died away, a man who had been sitting in an extreme corner of the room scraped back his chair and rose. Fernet looked up. The man was a hunchback, and, instead of paying for his meal and leaving, he crossed over and said to Fernet, in the most perfect French imaginable:

"I see, my young fellow, that you are discussing something of interest with your friends here. Would it be impertinent for me to inquire into the subject?"

Fernet drew out a chair for the newcomer, who seated himself.

"By no means. We were discussing a murder and suicide. The murdered man was an Italian fisherman who lodged at the Hôtel des Alpes Maritimes, the suicide was a musician named Suvaroff."

"Ah," said the hunchback, cracking his fingers. "Why a murder and suicide? Why not two murders?"

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"Because," returned Fernet, pompously, "it was abundantly proved to the contrary. This man Suvaroff suffered from neuralgia; the Italian fisherman was given to playing the accordion at all hours of the night. Suvaroff was, in addition, a musician—a high-strung person. The Italian's playing was abominable—even his landlady says as much. In short, Suvaroff deliberately killed this simple-minded peasant because of his music. Then, in a fit of remorse, he killed himself. I leave it to any one here to dispute the fact. Besides, I was on the coroner's jury. I should know what I am talking about."

"Oh, without doubt," agreed the hunchback, smiling amiably. "But, as I remember, the knives in both cases were plunged hilt-deep into the backs of the victims. One does not usually commit suicide in this fashion."

Fernet coldly eyed the curiously handsome face of his antagonist. "It seems you know more about this thing than a coroner's jury," he sneered.

"It seems I do—granting that such an important item was left out of the evidence."

"Then, my good sir, will you be good enough to tell me who *did* kill Suvaroff, since you do not admit that he died by his own hand?"

The hunchback cracked his fingers again. "That is simple enough. Suvaroff was killed by the same person who stabbed the Italian."

"And who might that be, pray?"

The hunchback rose with a malignant smile. "Ah, if I told you that you would know as much as I do, my friend."

And with that he walked calmly over to the proprietor, put down thirty-five cents for his meal upon the counter, and without another word left the room.

A silence fell upon the group. Everybody stared straight ahead, avoiding the eye of his neighbor. It was as if something too terrifying to be remarked had passed them.

Finally, a thick-set man at Fernet's right, with a purple wart on his cheek, said, uneasily, "Come, I must be going."

The others rose; only Fernet remained seated.

"What," said another, "have n't you finished?"

"Yes," returned Fernet, gloomily, "but I am in no hurry."

He sat there for an hour, alone, holding his head between his hands. Berthe cleared off the soiled plates, wiped the oilcloth-covered tables, began noisily to lay the pewter knives and forks for the morning meal. At this Fernet stirred himself and, looking up at her, said:

"Tell me who was the hunchback who came and sat with us? Does he live here—in San Francisco?"

"His name is Flavio Minetti," she replied, setting the lid back upon an uncovered sugar-bowl. "Beyond that I know nothing. But they tell me that he is quite mad."

"Ah, that accounts for many things," said Fernet, smiling with recovered assurance. "I must say he is strangely fascinating."

Berthe looked at him sharply and shrugged. "For my part, he makes me shiver every time I see him come in the door. When I serve him my hand shakes. And he continually cracks his fingers and says to me: 'Come, Berthe, what can I do to make you smile? Would you laugh if I were to dance for you? I would give half my life only to see you laughing. Why are you so sad?' . . . No, I wish he would never come again."

"Nevertheless, I should like to see him once more."

"He comes always on Thursdays for chicken."

"Thanks," said Fernet, as he put on his hat.

Fernet walked directly to his lodgings that night. He had a room in an old-fashioned house on the east side of Telegraph Hill. The room was shabby enough, but it caught glimpses of the bay and there was a gnarled pepper-tree that came almost to its windows and gave Fernet a sense of eternal, though grotesque, spring. Even his landlord was unusual—a professional beggar who sat upon the curb, with a ridiculous French poodle for company, and sold red and green pencils.

This landlord was sitting out by the front gate as Fernet entered.

"Ah, Pollitto," said Fernet, halting before the old man and snapping his fingers at the poodle who lay crouched

before his master, "I see you are enjoying this fine warm night."

"You are wrong," replied the beggar. "I am merely sitting here hoping that some one will come along and rent my front room."

"Then it is vacant?"

"Naturally," replied the old man, with disagreeable brevity, and Fernet walked quickly up to his room.

"Why do I live in such a place?" he asked himself, surveying the four bare walls. "Everything about it is abominable, and that beggar, Pollitto, is a scoundrel. I shall move next week."

He crossed over to the window and flung it open. The pepper-tree lay before him, crouching in the moonlight. He thought at once of Flavio Minetti.

"He is like this pepper-tree," he said, aloud, "beautiful even in his deformity. No, I would not trade this pepper-tree for a dozen of the straightest trees in the world." He stepped back from the window, and, lighting a lamp, set it upon a tottering walnut table. "Ah, André Fernet," he mused, chidingly, "you are always snared by what is unusual. You should pray to God that such folly does not lead you to disaster."

He went to the window and looked out again. The pepper-tree seemed to be bending close to the ground, as if seeking to hide something. Presently the wind parted its branches and the moonlight fell at its feet like a silver moth before a blackened candle.

André Fernet shivered and sighed. "Yes," he repeated, again and again, "they are alike. They both are at once beautiful and hideous and they have strange secrets. . . . Well, I shall go on Thursday again, and maybe I shall see him. Who knows, if I am discreet he may tell me who killed this ridiculous musician Suvaroff."

And with that he suddenly blew out the light.

On the next Thursday night, when Fernet entered the dining-room of the Hôtel de France his glance rested immediately upon Flavio Minetti. To his surprise the hunchback rose, drawing a chair out as he did so, and beckoning Fernet to be seated next him. For a moment Fernet hesitated. Berthe was just bringing on the soup.

"What! Are you afraid?" she said, mockingly, as she passed.

This decided Fernet. He went and sat beside Minetti without further ado.

"Ah, I was expecting you!" cried the hunchback, genially, as he passed the radishes.

"Expecting *me*?" returned Fernet. His voice trembled, though he tried to speak boldly.

"Yes. Women are not the only inquisitive animals in the world. What will you have — some wine?"

Fernet allowed Minetti to fill his glass.

Other boarders began to drift in. Minetti turned his back upon Fernet, speaking to a new-comer at his left. He did not say another word all evening.

Fernet ate and drank in silence. "What did I come for and why am I staying?" he kept asking himself. "This man is mocking me. First of all, he greets me as if I were his boon companion, and next he insults me openly and before everybody in the room. Even Berthe has noticed it and is smiling. As a matter of fact, he knows no more than I do about Suvaroff's death."

But he continued to sit beside the hunchback all through the meal, and as fruit was put on the table he touched Minetti on the arm and said, "Will you join me in a *café royal*?"

"Not here . . . a little later. I can show you a place where they really know how to make them. And, besides, there are tables for just two. It is much more private."

Fernet's heart bounded and sank almost in one leap. "Let us go now, then," he said, eagerly.

"As you wish," replied Minetti.

Fernet paid for two dinners, and they reached for their hats.

"Where are you going?" asked Berthe, as she opened the door.

Fernet shrugged. "I am in his hands," he answered, sweeping his arm toward Minetti.

"You mean you will be," muttered the hunchback, in an undertone.

Fernet heard him distinctly.

"Perhaps I had better leave him while there is yet time!" flashed through his mind. But the next instant he thought, contemptuously: "What harm can he do me? Why, his wrist is no bigger than a pullet's wing. Bah! You are a fool, André Fernet!"

They stepped out into the street. A languorous note was in the air; the usual cool wind from the sea had not risen. A waning moon silvered the roof-tops, making a pretense of hiding its face in the thin line of smoke above Telegraph Hill.

The hunchback led the way, trotting along in a fashion almost Oriental. At the end of the second block he turned abruptly into a wine-shop; Fernet followed. They found seats in a far corner, away from the billiard-tables. A waiter came forward. They gave their orders.

"Be sure," said Minetti to the waiter, "that we have plenty of anisette and cognac in the coffee."

The man flicked a towel rather contemptuously and made no answer.

"Now," Minetti continued, turning a mocking face toward Fernet, "what can I do for you, my friend?"

Fernet was filled with confusion. "I . . . you . . ." he stammered. "Really, there is nothing. Believe me —"

"Nonsense," interrupted Minetti. "You wish to know who killed Suvaroff. But I warn you, my friend, it is a dreadful thing to share such a secret."

He looked at Fernet intently. The younger man shuddered. "Nevertheless, I should like to know," Fernet said, distinctly.

"Well, then, since you are so determined — it was I who killed him."

Fernet stared, looked again at the hunchback's puny wrists, and began to laugh. "*You!* Do you take me for a fool?" And as he said this he threw back his head and laughed until even the billiard-players stopped their game and looked around at him.

"What are you laughing at?" asked the hunchback, narrowing his eyes.

Fernet stopped. He felt a sudden chill as if some one

had opened a door. "I am laughing at you," he answered.

"I am sorry for that," said Minetti, dryly.

"Why?"

The hunchback leaned forward confidentially. "Because I kill every one who laughs at me. It — it is a little weakness I have."

The waiter came with two glasses of steaming coffee. He put them down on the table, together with a bottle of cognac and a bottle of anisette.

"Ah, that is good!" cried the hunchback, rubbing his hands together. "The proprietor is my friend. He is going to let us prepare our own poison!"

Fernet felt himself shivering. "Come," he thought, "this will never do! The man is either mad or jesting." He reached for the anisette.

"Let me pour it for you," suggested Flavio Minetti. "Your hand is shaking so that you will spill half of it on the floor."

The hunchback's voice had a note of pity in it. Fernet relinquished his hold upon the bottle.

"Don't look so frightened," continued Minetti. "I shall not kill you here. The proprietor is a friend of mine, and, besides —"

"What nonsense!" cried Fernet, with a ghastly smile. "But I must confess, you did make my blood run cold for a minute."

Minetti stirred some cognac into his glass. "And, besides," he finished, coldly, "I give everybody a sporting chance. It adds to the game."

That night André Fernet was restless. He lay on his bed looking out at the blinking lights of the harbor. "I must stop drinking coffee," he muttered to himself.

Finally he fell asleep, and when he did he had a strange dream. It seemed that the pepper-tree outside his window suddenly began to move in the night breeze and its long green boughs became alive, twisting like the relentless tentacles of a devil-fish. Its long green boughs became alive, crawling along the ground, flinging themselves into the air, creeping in at André Fernet's open

window. He lay upon the bed as he had done earlier in the evening, watching the harbor lights. Slowly the green boughs writhed over the faded carpet, scaled the bedpost and fell upon the bed. André Fernet waited, motionless. He felt the green tentacles close about his legs, clasp his hands, slide shudderingly across his throat. Yet he made no move to free himself. It was only when he felt a breath upon his cheek that he turned slightly, and instead of the tentacle-like boughs of the pepper-tree he fancied himself staring down at the hands of Flavio Minetti. . . . He awoke with a start. The sun was pouring in at the open window. He got up quickly. A noisy clatter issued from the passageway. Fernet opened his door. Two men were carrying a trunk up the stairs. Pollitto, the beggar, walked behind.

"Ah, I see you have rented your front room," said Fernet, stepping out.

"Yes," returned the other. "It was taken as early as six o'clock this morning—by a hunchback."

Fernet stopped breathing. "A hunchback? Was his name Flavio Minetti?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

Fernet tried to smile. "He is a friend of mine," he answered, as he walked back into his room. "Perhaps it would be better if I moved away," he thought. "I do not like this room. Heaven knows why I have stayed this long. Is this fellow Minetti really mad or merely making sport of me? I should not like to have him think that I am afraid of him. As for his story about Suvaroff, that is, of course, ridiculous. If I thought otherwise I should go at once to the . . . No, it is all a joke! I shall stay where I am. I shall not have it said that a little, mad, puny, twisted fellow frightened André Fernet out of his lodgings. Besides, it will be curious to watch his little game. What a beautiful morning it is, after all! And the pepper-tree—how it glistens in the sun! I should miss that pepper-tree if I moved away. But I must stop drinking *cafés royals*. They upset one. I do not know whether it is the coffee, or the cognac, or the anisette, or all three. Of course, that dream I had toward morning means nothing—but such dreams are unpleas-

ant. I hate this place. But I shall not move now. No, I shall wait and see what happens."

Fernet did not see Minetti for some days. Indeed, he had dismissed the whole thing from his mind, when, one night, returning home early to get out of a drizzle, who should stop him on the stairway but the hunchback.

"Ah, so here you are!" called out Fernet, gaily, in spite of his rapidly beating heart. "I have been waiting for you to call on me ever since I heard that you were lodging under the same roof."

"I have been busy," replied the hunchback, laconically.

Fernet threw open his bedroom door and waved Minetti in.

"Busy?" he echoed, as he struck a light. "And what do you find that is so absorbing, pray?"

"You know my specialty," replied Minetti, flinging off his cap.

Fernet looked up sharply. A malignant look had crept into the hunchback's face.

"Oh, there is no doubt of it, he is quite mad!" said Fernet to himself. Then aloud: "Yes, I have been wanting to talk to you more about this. Take a seat and I shall make some coffee. For instance, do you always employ the knife in despatching your—"

"Scarcely," interrupted Minetti, quickly. "Slow poison has its fascinations. There is a very delicate joy in watching a gradual decline. It is like watching a green leaf fading before the breath of autumn. First a sickly pallor, then a yellowing, finally the sap dries completely, a sharp wind, a fluttering in the air, and it is all over. I have tried nearly every slow way—except mental murder. I fancy that, too, would be exquisite."

"Mental murder. . . . I do not understand."

Minetti stretched himself out and yawned. "Accomplishing the thing without any weapon save the mind."

Fernet picked up the coffee-pot and laughed. "Why, my dear fellow, it is too absurd! The thing cannot be done. You see I am laughing at you again, but no matter."

"No, as you say, it is no matter. You can die only once."

Fernet's laughter stopped instantly. He went on with his preparation for coffee. Minetti changed the subject.

It turned out that there was no sugar in the cracked bowl. Fernet was putting on his hat to go out for some, when the hunchback stopped him.

"Sugar will not be necessary," he said. And as he spoke he drew a vial from his vest pocket and laid it upon the table beside the cups. "You know what these are, of course."

"Saccharine pellets?" inquired Fernet as he threw aside his hat.

Minetti replied with a grunt. Fernet poured out the coffee, set a spoon in each saucer, laid three French rolls upon a blue plate. Then he sat down.

"Permit me!" said Minetti, reaching for the vial and rolling a tiny pellet into his palm.

Fernet held up his cup; the hunchback dropped the pellet into it. Then he corked the vial tightly and laid it aside.

"You forgot to serve yourself," said Fernet.

"So I did!" answered Minetti, nonchalantly. "Well, no matter. I very often drink my coffee so—without sweetening."

Fernet drew back suddenly. Could it be possible that . . . The hunchback was staring at him, an ironical smile was on his lips. Fernet shuddered.

"Drink your coffee!" Minetti commanded, sneeringly. "You are on the verge of a chill."

Fernet obeyed meekly. He felt for all the world like an animal caught in a trap. He tried to collect his thoughts. What had the hunchback been talking about?

"Slow poison!" muttered Fernet, inaudibly to himself.

"What is that you are saying?" demanded the other.

"You were speaking of slow poison. How do you go about it?"

"Oh, that is easy! For instance, once in London I lodged next door to my victim. We became capital friends. And he was always calling me in for a bite of something to eat. Nothing elaborate—a bun and a cup

of tea, or coffee and cake. Very much as we are doing now. He died in six months. It is no trick, you know, to poison a man who eats and drinks with you — especially drinks!”

As he said this the hunchback reached for the coffee-pot and poured Fernet another cupful. Then he uncorked the vial again and dropped a pellet into the steaming liquid.

“I do not think that I wish any more,” protested Fernet.

“Nonsense! You are still shivering like an old woman with the palsy. Hot coffee will do you good.”

“No,” said Fernet, desperately, “I never drink more than one cup at a sitting. It keeps me awake, and next morning my hand shakes and I am fit for nothing. I need a steady hand in my business.”

“And what may that be, pray?”

“At present I am a draftsman. Some day, if I live long enough, I hope to be an architect.”

“If you live long enough? You forget that you have laughed at *me*, my friend.”

Fernet tried to appear indifferent. “What a droll fellow you are!” he cried, with sudden gaiety, rubbing his hands together. And without thinking, he reached for his coffee-cup and downed the contents in almost one gulp. He laid the cup aside quickly. He could feel the sweat starting out upon his forehead.

“There, you see,” said Minetti, “the coffee has done you good already. You are perspiring, and that is a good sign. A hot drink at the right moment works wonders.”

The next morning Pollitto stopped Fernet as he swung out the front gate to his work.

“What is the matter with you?” exclaimed the beggar, in a surprised tone.

“Why . . . what?” demanded Fernet, in a trembling voice. “Do I look so . . . ? Pray, tell me, is there anything unusual about me?”

“Why, your face . . . Have you looked at yourself in the glass? Your skin is the color of stale pastry.”

Fernet tried to laugh. "It is nothing. I have been drinking too much coffee lately. I must stop it."

It was a fine morning. The sun was shining and the air was brisk and full of little rippling breezes. The bay lay like a blue-green peacock ruffling its gilded feathers. The city had a genial, smiling countenance. But Fernet was out of humor with all this full-blown content. He had spent a wretched night—not sleepless, but full of disturbing dreams. Dreams about Minetti and his London neighbor and the empty sugar-bowl. All night he had dreamed about this empty sugar-bowl. It seemed that as soon as he had it filled Minetti would slyly empty it again. He tried stowing sugar away in his pockets, but when he put his hand in to draw out a lump a score or more of pellets spilled over the floor. Then he remembered saying:

"I shall call on Minetti's London neighbor. Maybe he will have some sugar."

He walked miles and miles, and finally beat upon a strange door. A man wrapped in a black coat up to his eyebrows opened to his knock.

"Are you Flavio Minetti's London neighbor?" he demanded, boldly.

The figure bowed. Fernet drew the cracked sugar-bowl from under his arm.

"Will you oblige me with a little sugar?" he asked, more politely.

The black-cloaked figure bowed and disappeared. Presently he came back. Fernet took the sugar-bowl from him. It struck him that the bowl felt very light. He looked down at his hands. The bowl had disappeared; only a glass vial lay in his palm. He removed the cork—a dozen or more tiny round pellets fell out. He glanced up quickly at Minetti's London neighbor; a dreadful smile glowed through the black cloak. Fernet gave a cry and hurled the vial in the face of his tormentor. Minetti's London neighbor let the black cloak fall, and André Fernet discovered that he was staring at himself. . . . He awakened soon after that and found that it was morning.

When he brushed his hair his hand had shaken so that

the brush fell clattering to the floor. And he had spilled the cream for his morning coffee over the faded strip of carpet before the bureau. It had ended by his eating no breakfast at all. But he had drunk glass after glass of cold water.

After Pollitto's words he trembled more and more like a man with the ague, and before every saloon-door mirror he halted and took a brief survey of his face. Pollitto was right—his skin was dead and full of unhealthy pallor. It was plain that he could not work in his present condition. His trembling fingers could scarcely hold a pencil, much less guide it through the precise demands of a drafting-board. He decided to go to the library and read. But the books on architecture which always enthralled him could not hold his shifting attention. Finally in despair he went up to the librarian and said:

"Have you any books on poison?"

The woman eyed him with a cold, incurious glance.

"Historical or medical?" she snapped out, as she went on stamping mysterious numbers in the pile of books before her.

"Both!"

She consulted a catalogue and made a list for him.

He sat all day devouring books which the librarian had recommended. He did not even go out for lunch. He read historical and romantic instances with a keen, morbid relish; but when it came to the medical books his heart quickened and he followed causes and effects breathlessly. By nightfall he had a relentless knowledge of every poison in the calendar. He knew what to expect from arsenic or strychnine or vitriol. He learned which poisons destroyed tissues, which acted as narcotics, which were irritants. He identified the hemlock, the horse-chestnut, the deadly toadstools. In short, he absorbed and retained everything on the subject. It seemed that the world teemed with poisons; one could be sure of nothing. Even beautiful flowers were not to be trusted.

He was so upset by all he had read that he could scarcely eat dinner. He went to an obscure *pension* in a wretched basement, where he was sure he would be un-

known, and, after two or three mouthfuls of soup and a spoonful of rice boiled with tomato, he rose, paid for his meal, and went out to tramp up and down past the tawdry shops of middle Kearny Street. He was trotting aimlessly in the direction of Market Street when he felt a tug at his coat-sleeve. He turned. Minetti was smiling genially up at him.

"Come," said the hunchback, "what is your hurry? Have you had coffee yet? I was thinking that —"

Fernet's heart sank at once. And yet he managed to say boldly: "I have given up drinking coffee. You can see for yourself what a wretched complexion I have. And to-day I have scarcely eaten."

"Pooh!" cried Minetti. "A cup of coffee will do you good."

Fernet began to draw away in futile terror. "No!" he protested, with frightened vehemence. "No, I tell you! I won't drink the stuff! It is useless for you to —"

Minetti began to laugh with scornful good-humor. "What has come over you?" he drawled, half-closing his eyes. "Are you afraid?"

And as he said this Fernet glanced instinctively at the puny wrists, no bigger than a pullet's wing, and replied, boldly:

"Afraid? Of what? I told you last night I need a steady hand in my business, and to-day I have not been able to do any work."

Minetti's mirth softened into genial acquiescence. "Well, maybe you are right. But I must say you are not very companionable. Perhaps the coffee you have been drinking has not been made properly. You should take *something*. You do look badly. A glass of brandy? . . . No? . . . Ah, I have it — coffee made in the Turkish fashion. Have you ever drunk that?"

"No," replied Fernet, helplessly, wondering all the time why he was foolish enough to tell the truth.

"Weil, then," announced the hunchback, confidently, "we shall cross over to Third Street and have some Turkish coffee. I know a Greek café where they brew a cup that would tempt the Sultan himself. Have you ever seen it made? They use coffee pounded to a fine powder

—a teaspoonful to a cup, and sugar in the same proportion. It is all put in together and brought to a boil. The result is indescribable! Really, you are in for a treat.”

“If it is sweetened in the making,” flashed through Fernet’s mind, “at least we shall have no more of that pellet business.”

“Yes—the result is quite indescribable,” Minetti was repeating, “and positively no bad effects.”

And as he said this he slipped his arm into Fernet’s and guided him with gentle firmness toward the Greek café in question. Fernet felt suddenly helpless and incapable of offering the slightest objection.

A girl took their orders. She had a freckled nose and was frankly Irish. Naturally, she did not fit the picture, and Fernet could see that she was scornful of the whole business.

“Two coffees . . . medium,” Minetti repeated, decisively. “And will you have a sweet with it? They sell taffy made of sesame seeds and honey. Or you can have Turkish delight or a pastry dusted with powdered sugar. Really they are all quite delicious.”

Fernet merely shrugged. Minetti ordered Turkish delight. The girl wiped some moisture from the marble table-top and walked toward the coffee-shelf.

“So you were not able to work to-day?” Minetti began, affably. “How did you put in the time?”

“At the library, reading.”

“Something droll? A French novel or—”

“Books on *poison*!” Fernet shot out with venomous triumph. “I know more than I did yesterday.”

“How distressing!” purred Minetti. “Ignorance is more invulnerable than one fancies. Of course we are taught otherwise, but knowledge, you remember, was the beginning of all trouble. But you choose a fascinating subject. Some day when we get better acquainted I shall tell you all I know about it. Poison is such a subtle thing. It is everywhere—in the air we breathe, in the water we drink, in the food we eat. And it is at once swift and sluggish, painful and stupefying, obvious and incapable of analysis. It is like a beautiful woman, or a great joy, or love itself.”

Fernet glanced up sharply. The hunchback had slid forward in his seat and his eyes glowed like two shaded pools catching greedily at the yellow sunlight of midday. Fernet shuddered and looked about the room. Groups of swarthy men were drinking coffee, or sipping faintly red draughts of cherry syrup and sweet soda. At a near-by table a group of six shuffled cards and marked their scores upon a slate. And, of course, there were those who played backgammon, rattling the dice and making exaggerated gestures as they spurred on their adversaries with genial taunts.

The girl came back carrying cups of thick steaming coffee and soft lemon-colored sweetmeats speared with two tiny silver forks. She set the tray down. Minetti reached for his coffee greedily, but Fernet sat back in his seat and allowed the waitress to place the second cup before him. As she did so the table shook suddenly and half of the hot liquid spilled over on the marble tabletop. Fernet jumped up to escape the scalding trickle; the girl gave an apologetic scream; Minetti laughed strangely.

"It is all my fault!" cried the hunchback. "What stupidity! Pray be seated. My young woman, will you give the gentleman this coffee of mine? And get me another."

"Pardon me," Fernet protested, "but I cannot think of such a thing!" And with that he attempted to pass the coffee in question back to Minetti. But the hunchback would have none of it. Fernet broke into a terrified sweat.

"He has dropped poison into it!" he thought, in sudden panic. "Otherwise why should he be so anxious to have me drink it? He kicked the table deliberately, too. And this cup of his—why was it not spilled also? No, he was prepared—it is all a trick!"

"Come, come, my friend," broke in Minetti, briskly, "drink your coffee while it is still hot! Do not wait for me. I shall be served presently. And try the sweetmeats; they are delicious."

"I am not hungry," replied Fernet, sullenly.

"No? Well, what of that? Sweetmeats and coffee

are not matters of hunger. Really, you are more droll than you imagine!" Minetti burst into a terrifying laugh.

"He thinks I am afraid!" muttered Fernet.

And out of sheer bravado he lifted the cup to his lips. Minetti stopped laughing, but a wide smile replaced his diabolical mirth. The girl brought fresh coffee to the hunchback. He sipped it with frank enjoyment, but he did not once take his gaze from Fernet's pale face.

"Well," thought Fernet, "one cup of poison more or less will not kill me. . . . It is not as if he has made up his mind to finish me at once. He is counting on the exquisite joys of a prolonged agony." And he remembered Minetti's words: "It is like watching a green leaf fading before the breath of autumn. First a sickly pallor, then a yellowing, a sharp wind, a fluttering in the air. . . ." He tossed off the coffee in one defiant gulp. "He thinks that he has me in his power. But André Fernet is not quite a fool. I shall go away to-morrow!"

They went home as soon as Minetti finished his coffee. Fernet felt a sudden nausea; by the time he reached his lodgings his steps were unsteady and his head reeled. Minetti was kindness itself.

"Let me help you into bed," he insisted. "You must have a congestion. Presently I shall heat some water and give you a hot gin."

Fernet was too sick to protest. Minetti started the gas-stove and filled the kettle and went into his room for gin. Fernet dragged himself out of his clothes and crawled in between the sheets. Minetti came back. Fernet lay with his eyes half-closed, shivering. Finally the water boiled, and the hunchback brought Fernet a huge tumbler of gin and water with bits of lemon-peel and cloves floating in it. It tasted so good that Fernet forgot his terror for the moment. But when the tumbler was empty he felt helpless; he could scarcely lift his arms; so he lay flat upon his back, staring up at the ceiling. He tried to recall scraps of what he had been reading all afternoon. What was the name of the poison that left one paralyzed? He could not remember. He found his

movements becoming more and more difficult; he could scarcely turn in bed. Minetti brewed another toddy. Fernet could not hold the glass. He tried to push the tumbler away from his lips, but his efforts were useless. Minetti hovered above him with a bland, gentle smile, and Fernet felt the warm liquid trickling into his mouth and down his throat. In the midst of all this he lost consciousness. . . . Once or twice during the night Fernet had a wakeful interlude. Whenever he opened his eyes he saw Minetti sitting before the open window, gazing down at the twisted pepper-tree.

"Yes, they are both alike!" passed dimly through his mind. "They both are at once beautiful and hideous and they have strange secrets! It is no use, I must go away—to-morrow."

In the morning Minetti was standing by the bed. "I have sent for the doctor," he said. But his voice sounded far away.

The doctor came shortly after ten o'clock. He was a little wizened, dried-up old man with a profound air.

"He is a fraud!" thought Fernet. "He knows nothing!"

"Ah," said the doctor, putting a sly finger against his sharp nose, "our friend here has a nervous collapse. He should have a nurse!"

"A nurse!" exclaimed Minetti, with indignation. "And, pray, what do you call me? Do you not think that—"

"Well, we shall see! we shall see!" replied the doctor, rubbing his hands together. "But he will need all sorts of delicacies and—"

Minetti moistened his lips with sleek satisfaction. "You cannot name a dish that I am not able to prepare."

"How about a custard? To-day he should eat something light."

"A custard is simplicity itself," answered the hunchback, and he cracked his fingers.

Minetti went out with the doctor, and came back shortly, carrying eggs and a bottle of vanilla extract and sugar. Fernet lay helpless, watching him bustling about.

Finally the delicacy was made and set away in a pan of water to cool. At noon Minetti brought a blue bowl filled with custard to the bedside. It looked inviting, but Fernet shook his head.

"I am not hungry," he lied.

The hunchback set the bowl down on a chair so that Fernet gazed upon it all day. The hunchback did not leave the room. He sat before the open window, reading from a thick book. Toward nightfall Fernet said to him:

"What do you find so interesting?"

Minetti darted a sardonic glance at his patient. "A book on *poison*. I did not realize that I had grown so rusty on the subject. Why, I remember scarcely enough to poison a field-mouse!"

He rose and crossed over to the bedside. "Do you not feel ready for the custard?"

Fernet cast a longing eye upon the yellow contents of the blue bowl.

"No. To tell the truth, I never eat it."

Minetti shrugged.

"But I should like a glass of water."

The hunchback drew water from the faucet. Fernet watched him like a ferret.

"At least," thought Fernet, "he cannot drop poison in the water secretly. It is well that I can see every move he makes at such a time. I should not like to die of thirst."

A little later Minetti removed the bowl and threw out its contents. Fernet looked on with half-closed eyes.

"What better proof could I have?" he mused. "If the custard were harmless he would eat it himself. I must get away to-morrow."

But the next day he felt weaker than ever, and when the doctor came Minetti said, in answer to questions:

"I made a delicious custard yesterday and he ate every bit. . . . An oyster stew? . . . with milk? I shall see that he has it at noon."

"God help me!" muttered Fernet. "Why does he lie like this? I must get the doctor's ear and tell him how things stand. I shall eat nothing—nothing! Thank Heaven I can drink water without fear."

At noon the oyster stew was ready. But Fernet would have none of it. "Oysters make me ill!" he said.

Minetti merely shrugged as he had done the previous day, and set the savory dish upon a chair before the bed. It exuded tantalizing odors, until Fernet thought he would go mad with longing. Toward evening Minetti threw out the stew. And as before, when the doctor called the hunchback said:

"He ate a quart of stew and there were plenty of oysters in it, I can tell you. Do you think that a chicken fried in olive-oil would be too hearty?"

Fernet groaned. "This is horrible—horrible!" he wept to himself. "I shall die like a starving rat with toasted cheese dangling just beyond reach. God help me to rouse myself! Surely the effects of the poison he has given me must soon wear off. . . . There he is, reading from that big book again. Perhaps he is contriving a way to put poison in my water even though I am able to watch him when he draws me a drink. . . . Poison—poison everywhere. It can even be administered with the prick of a needle. Why did I read about it? Chicken fried in olive-oil . . . what torture!"

The chicken fried in olive-oil was a triumph—Fernet knew all this by the wisps of appetizing fragrance which drifted from the sizzling pan. Minetti made a great stir over the preparations. The tender flesh had to be rubbed thoroughly with garlic and well dusted with salt and pepper. And a quarter of a bottle of yellow-green olive-oil was first placed in the pan. When everything was ready and the chicken cooked to a turn, Minetti carried it to Fernet with a great flourish. Fernet gritted his teeth and turned his face away. He did not have the courage to invent an excuse. Minetti laid it on the chair as usual. For two hours Fernet was tortured with the sight of this tempting morsel, but at the sound of the doctor's step upon the stair the hunchback whisked away the chicken.

"His appetite?" Minetti said, echoing the doctor's query. "Why, one could not wish for better! Only this morning he despatched a chicken as if it had been no

more than a soft-boiled egg. As a matter of fact, he is always hungry."

"Well, well," beamed the doctor, "that is the best of signs, and it happens that way very often in nervous cases. You are a capital nurse, my good man, and by the end of the week, if you keep feeding him up in this fashion, he should be as hearty as a school-boy."

At that moment Minetti was called down-stairs by his landlord. Fernet struggled to lift himself; the doctor bent toward him.

"This hunchback," Fernet gasped, "he is trying to poison me. Already I have drunk four or five of his concoctions, and that is why I am in this condition . . . helpless. And he is lying when he says that I have eaten. I have touched nothing for three days."

The doctor laid the patient back upon the pillow.

"Poison you, my friend? And for what reason?"

"Because I laughed at him. In God's name, Doctor, see that you keep a straight face in his presence or else—"

The doctor patted Fernet's hand and straightened the sliding bedclothes. By this time Minetti had come back. The doctor and the hunchback whispered together in a far corner. Minetti laughed and tapped his head. At the door Fernet heard the doctor say:

"Just keep up the good work and the idea will pass. It happens that way very often in nervous cases. I shall not look in again until the first of next week unless . . ."

Fernet groaned aloud.

"I must get away to-morrow. . . . I must get away to-morrow!" he kept on repeating.

By the end of the week the smell of food held no temptations for Fernet. Minetti stopped cooking. And when a glass of water was drawn from the faucet Fernet had difficulty in forcing his vision to answer the strain of a searching gaze.

"When my sight fails me," Fernet thought, dimly, "I shall either die of thirst or take the consequences."

When the doctor finally came again Fernet closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

"He seems thinner," remarked the doctor, as if he had made an important discovery.

"Well, to tell the truth," replied the hunchback, "he has lost his appetite. I have fed him milk and eggs, but —"

"There is nothing to do but be patient," said the doctor. "Medicine will do him no good. Just rest and food. Even a little starvation will not hurt him. People eat too much, anyway."

At this Fernet opened his eyes and broke into a laugh that startled even Minetti. The doctor looked offended.

"Well, he is in your hands," the old fraud said, pompously, to the hunchback. "Just keep up the good work —"

Fernet laughed again.

"He is hysterical," proclaimed the doctor, with an air of supreme wisdom. "It happens that way very often in nervous cases."

And he walked out with great solemnity.

"Ah, I have offended him!" thought Fernet. "Well, now they will finish me — *together!*"

There followed days of delicious weakness. Fernet lay for the most part wrapt in the bliss of silver-blue visions. It seemed as if years were passing. He built shining cities, received the homage of kings, surrendered himself to the joys of ripe-lipped beauties. There were lucid intervals shot through with the malignant presence of Minetti and the puttering visits of the doctor. But these were like waking moments between darkness and dawn, filled with the half-conscious joy of a sleeper secure in the knowledge of a prolonged respite. In such moments Fernet would stir feebly and think:

"I must get away to-morrow!"

And there would succeed almost instantly a languid ecstasy at the thought that to-morrow was something remote and intangible that would never come.

At times the hunchback seemed like nothing so much as a heartless gaoler who, if he would, might open the door to some shining adventure. Gradually this idea became fixed and elaborated. Fernet's sight grew dim-

mer and dimmer until he followed the presence of Minetti by the sounds he made.

"He is jingling something," Fernet would repeat, weakly. "Ah, it must be his keys! He is searching for the one that will set me free! . . . Now he is oiling the lock. . . . He has shut the door again. I am to be held awhile longer. . . . I am a caged bird and just beyond is the pepper-tree. It must be glistening now in the sunlight. Well, let him lock the door, for all the good it will do him. Is not the window always open? When the time comes I shall fly out the window and leave him here—alone. Then we shall see who has the best of this bargain."

And all the silver-blue visions would steal over him again, to be pierced briefly by the arrival of the wizened doctor.

"It is he who keeps me here!" Fernet would say to himself. "If it were not for him I could fly away—forever. Well, presently even he will lose his power."

One day a strange man stood at his bedside. Minetti was there also, and the old fraud of a doctor. The strange man drew back the covers and put his ear to Fernet's fluttering heart and went through other tiresome matters. . . . Finally he smoothed back the covers again, and as he did so he shook his head. He spoke softly, but Fernet heard him distinctly.

"It is too late. . . . You should have called me sooner. He wishes to die. . . . There is nothing to be done."

"Yes, yes—it happens this way very often in nervous cases."

"I have done my best. I have given him food and drink. I have even starved him. But nothing seemed to do any good."

"No," said the stranger; "it is his mind. He has made up his mind that . . . You can do nothing with a man when . . ."

Fernet closed his eyes.

"A man! They think I am a man. What stupidity! Can they not see that I am a bird? . . . They have gone out. He is locking the door again . . . I can hear the

keys jingle. . . . Well, let him lock the door if it gives him any pleasure. The window is open and to-night . . ."

The footsteps of the departing visitors died away. A chuckling sound came to André Fernet and the thump of ecstatic fists brought down upon a bare table-top. The voice of Flavio Minetti was quivering triumphantly like the hot whisper of a desert wind through the room:

"Without any weapon save the mind! Ha! ha! ha!"

Fernet turned his face toward the wall. "He is laughing at *me* now. Well, let him laugh while he may. . . . Is not the window open? To-morrow I shall be free . . . and he? . . . No, *he* cannot fly—he has a broken wing. . . . The window is open, André Fernet!"